

14Jun95 SPAIN: THE DRAIN ON SPAIN - NEW HYDROLOGICAL PLAN TO TACKLE DROUGHT.

By John Hooper.

The Spanish government has launched a massive hydrological plan to tackle drought. But is the root problem climatic or cultural?

IN BRITAIN, things are reckoned to be getting ugly when an egg gets thrown at the minister's car. Last month, Spain's agriculture minister, Luis Atienza, had a sheep flung at his car - and the incident only made page 47 in the following day's edition of *El Mundo*.

Mr Atienza was on a visit to the drought-stricken region of La Mancha when he ran into about 50 angry farmers and their woolly projectile. The demonstrators, chanting "Less lies and more aid", were protesting at what they claimed was the inadequacy of government measures to offset the effects of a drought which their spokesman said had cost more than half a billion pounds in La Mancha alone.

The drought affecting large parts of Spain is now in its fifth year. A leaked government report published two months ago predicted that some parts of the south could run out of drinking water by October unless it rained significantly during what remained of the spring. What remained of the spring has gone, and it hasn't rained anything like significantly.

For Spain's environmental lobbyists, the drought is clear evidence of the global warming which they and their counterparts elsewhere have been prophesying for years.

But is it? For an answer, Antonio Labajo, a deputy director general of the National Meteorological Institute in Madrid, draws out a graph. It is based on a four-year moving average for the rainfall in Badajoz, a city near the Portuguese frontier with weather conditions typical of those in much of the drought-prone south.

First, he shows you the graph, with his hand covering up all but one-third of the page on the right - all but that part which shows how much rain fell between the early sixties and the mid-eighties. He points out that what you see is a sharp, if erratic, drop in rainfall entirely consistent with global warming. Then he takes his hand away, and what you see is that two long stretches in the earlier part of the century were even drier. "If you look at the last 30 years, the answer to your question is 'yes', but if you look at a statistical series going back to the last century, then the issue becomes much less clear," Mr Labajo says. "The evidence still does not allow us to say with any certainty that we are experiencing a long-term climatic change."

The present drought he describes as "one of the two or three most significant this century". But he adds: "There have been worse ones - in the 1860s, for example."

From the environmental point of view, Mr Labajo's assessment cuts two ways. It may do nothing to support the greenhouse effect theory, but it reinforces the argument that Spain's drought is as much a problem of demand as one of supply.

Scientists and others monitoring Spain's water problems are increasingly talking of not one, but two, droughts - one "meteorological" and the other "cultural".

"The meteorological drought is considerable," Mr Labajo says. "But the drought which the ordinary citizen is experiencing is much greater because consumption is so high."

Encouraged by a surge in prosperity since the early sixties, the Spanish have chosen to forget the fact that they live in a semi-arid country, large swathes of which are prone to periodic, lengthy droughts. They have built golf courses for their tourists, and swimming pools for themselves. In towns and cities the length and breadth of the country, they have created lawns and gardens that require daily watering.

But, above all, they have allowed - and often encouraged - their farmers to diversify out of traditional, drought-resistant produce such as figs and olives into water-hungry crops like rice and strawberries. The result is that Spain today is the world's fourth highest per capita consumer of water, after the US, Canada and Russia. And 80% of it goes to agriculture.

The Socialist government's response, like that of previous administrations, has been to tackle the supply side. And how. Two years ago, it approved a scheme that would bring a smile to the lips of the more ambitious sort of Pharaoh. The National Hydrological Plan would involve the construction of an estimated 272 dams and hundreds of miles of aqueduct. It would be far and away the biggest public works project in Europe, soaking up more than enough money to build two Channel tunnels.

The plan has its origins in Spain's climatic idiosyncrasy. As in so many other respects, this is a land of extremes.

"The average annual rainfall is just under 700mm a year, which is not so very different from Britain," says Antonio Labajo.

The problem is one of uneven distribution. Almeria in the south-east has the lowest rainfall in Europe. Santiago de Compostela in the north-west is so utterly drenched that it once tried to turn its awful weather to advantage with a tourist slogan that said, "Where rain is art."

The idea of the National Hydrological Plan is to redress the balance by diverting huge quantities of water from the rivers of the north to the reservoirs of the south (see map).

From the government's standpoint, the plan has at least two merits. It would help use up the large sums of aid granted to Spain by its EU partners at the 1992 Edinburgh summit, and it would delight many of the voters in the Socialist strongholds of the rural south. But it would also, say critics, give new life to the venal system of party funding which lies at the core of Spanish politics.

Successive corruption scandals have brought to light a sizeable body of evidence to suggest that the Socialists - though not only the Socialists - fund many of their activities by charging "commission" in return for the award of public contracts. The National Hydrological Plan has the potential to generate such kickbacks on an unprecedented scale.

It also, says the environmental lobby, has a potential to inflict environmental damage on an unprecedented scale. "Rivers are not just canals for moving water around, but eco-systems with a life of their own," says Juan Lopez de Urralde, Greenpeace's campaigns director. By radically reducing the flow of the Ebro, he argues, the plan risks drying up the delta of Iberia's greatest river - an officially protected haven for migrating water fowl.

Hundreds of other natural habitats are at risk from the dams, particularly those planned for the Pyrenees. Spain's other big environmental association, the Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Defensa Ambiental (Coda), has estimated that 85 of the 272 dams to be built would cause "unacceptable" ecological damage.

Business Briefing

Whether these fears are justified is difficult to judge, because of the Spanish government's apparent reluctance to defend its plan. Neither of two departments in the catch-all Ministry of Public Works, Transport and Environment was able to provide a spokesperson for interview, despite repeated inquiries over a period of 10 days.

The environmental lobby has other criticisms of the plan. It questions both the technical efficiency and political expediency of the transfers it proposes. Spain's only existing large-scale project channels water from the Tagus to the Segura. It is currently running at a mere 30% of its projected capacity. But that has nevertheless been enough to cause a row between the administration in Castile-La Mancha, through which the Tagus flows, and that of the Valencian region, which is responsible for the Segura valley.

Other disputes are brewing between Navarre and Catalonia and between Catalonia and Aragon over the use of water from the Pyrenees, and between Catalonia and Aragon on the one hand and the Balearic Islands on the other over shipments of water to Majorca.

Moreover, at two points - on the Duero/Douro and the Guadiana - the Spanish plan to siphon off supplies that would otherwise become available to the Portuguese.

Officials at the Food and Agriculture Organisation in Rome judge that the Spanish-Portuguese frontier is the most likely setting within Europe for an international clash over water resources. Earlier this year, the European Commission's Institute for Prospective Technological studies quietly set up an office in Seville to investigate the situation more closely.

Spain's environmentalists also point out that the government's plan would increase the very demand it has been created to satisfy. The latest version foresees the creation of a further 400-600,000 hectares of irrigated land by the year 2012.

"The ministry has an engineers' lobby which has acquired a momentum of its own, and is continuing to apply a policy that goes back to the days of Franco, consisting essentially of huge construction projects," says Mr Lopez de Urralde. "Greenpeace's counter-proposal is to start by looking at demand; then, if more supply is needed, look at other possible methods, particularly desalinisation."

Less than 5% of the budget for the NHP is earmarked for improving existing irrigation systems, yet the scope for savings would seem to be immense. Losses in delivery are estimated at up to half. Less than 5% of Spain's irrigated land is watered by the drip method - compared with, for example, more than 71% in Cyprus.

Acknowledging the importance of the link with irrigation, the Spanish parliament has postponed further discussion of the NHP until after approval of a new nationwide irrigation policy.

In the meantime, it may fall to the environmentalists to pose a question the politicians are understandably loth to raise: in a Europe in which very little of Spain's agricultural produce is now competitive, is it really in the national interests to pour so much of its water on to the land?

GUARDIAN